

UC president sets in motion future medical school at Merced campus

First order of business is establishing an undergraduate medical program.

By Danielle Gaines

[Merced Sun-Star](#): University of California President Mark Yudof said planning for a medical school at UC Merced will move forward "as quickly as is reasonable" in terms of both textbooks and money.

Coming after a series of sometimes conflicting visions about the med school's status and future, the UC president's remarks set in motion a modified version of the original campus plan.

A consulting firm hired by UC Merced to analyze prospects of a med school for the San Joaquin Valley said it was a question of "when," not "if" such a facility would be finished.

Yudof made the statement at Wednesday morning's University of California Board of Regents meeting in San Francisco.

Yudof said he agreed with suggestions in a report from the Washington Advisory Group (WAG), the consulting firm.

The group suggested a phased process for opening a medical school at UC Merced.

The development of the school would move forward in three major steps, resulting in a full medical school by 2020.

"The health needs of the San Joaquin Valley are great," Yudof said. "A step-wise approach to development of a medical education and research program at UC Merced will give us the best chance of developing programs of the level of quality required to address those health

needs in a meaningful way."

The first step in the process would establish an undergraduate program in biomedical education at UC Merced.

At the Wednesday meeting, Yudof authorized Jack Stobo, UC senior vice president for health sciences and services, and the UC Merced staff to begin implementing the first step.

Valley residents from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds will get special consideration for admittance into the program.

According to the WAG report, titled "Planning for a 21st Century Medical School at UC Merced," this step could be completed by 2010. As many as 100 to 200 students could be admitted to the program each year.

In phase two, UC Merced would start out as a "branch campus" in conjunction with the UC Davis School of Medicine. This could happen as soon as 2012, as long as other key milestones are met.

Yudof also approved planning for the process Wednesday.

At the outset, 18 to 24 students would be admitted to UC Merced's branch campus of the UC Davis School of Medicine.

In the third and final stage, UC Merced would establish a fully independent medical school after functioning as a successful branch campus for a period of time.

At that time, the school would have to establish its primary location. The Washington Advisory

Group said the two most suitable locations are at the UC Merced campus and at the UCSF Fresno medical education campus.

Ideally, the third phase would be finished before 2020.

UC Merced Chancellor Steve Kang issued a statement shortly after Yudof's announcement: "While the timetable for a fully accredited, completely independent medical school is difficult to predict at this time due to the State of California's dire financial situation, the UC Merced School of Medicine will come to fruition," it said in part.

Kang went on to say that "the opening of the medical school would be linked to the availability of resources, the further development of core academic programs and the enhancement of health services research and education on campus."

This isn't the first time plans for the medical school have been in the news recently.

A fast-track medical school plan was presented by Lt. Gov. John Garamendi last month. Without a lower-cost alternative, Garamendi said it was likely the Merced medical school would be delayed and perhaps never opened at all as the state's budget crisis mounts.

Garamendi is also an ex-officio member of the Board of Regents; his son, John Garamendi Jr., works as the vice chancellor for University Relations at UC Merced.

Lt. Gov. Garamendi said in a phone interview after the announcement that he is pleased with the Washington Advisory Group's suggestion.

"I'm very happy this morning," Garamendi said. "Clearly (President Yudof) has authorized his office and UC Merced staff to plan for an undergraduate medical education program."

Garamendi added that the WAG suggestions were "completely in line with my suggestion" for a stripped-down version of the initial medical school that will be built up in the future.

"Over time, there will be a full-blown medical school at UC Merced similar to what the other UC schools have," Garamendi said.

Garamendi's plan also allowed for a "fast-track" medical education in which students begin medical education in their freshman year. That part of his plan wasn't supported by the advisory group.

The university will instead forge ahead with the "distributive model" for clinical rotations and residencies. Under this model, students would get their "hands-on" education at different clinics and hospitals throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

It is widely believed by university and community leaders that a medical school at UC Merced will provide more doctors that are sorely needed in this area.

San Joaquin Valley residents have the least access to physicians per capita of any region in California. On average, there are 302 physicians per 100,000 people in California. In the Valley, the number of physicians plunges to 173 per 100,000.

Congressman Dennis Cardoza said it was about time the Valley got a medical school that it both needs and deserves.

"There has been tremendous support (for a UC Merced medical school) in the Valley for a long time," he said in an interview.

Cardoza said that support will be valuable as the university moves forward to secure funding for the medical school.

"In tough budgetary times, it is always a challenge," Cardoza said. "But we are confident that we will be able to obtain the funding to make this a world-class institution."

UC Merced has already invested significant time and money in planning the medical school. The university has authored a 96-page program proposal and business plan, named Dr. Frederick J. Meyers as the executive director for Medical School Curriculum Development and Academic Planning and commissioned the feasibility report from the Washington Advisory Group.

"I think this is just great. It really shows a thoughtful approach to our real desire to improve medical care in the Valley," Meyers said. "We're going to have the very best (medical) program in the country."

UC Merced opened in 2005 with 875 students. The university hopes to post enrollment of 25,000 by 2035.

As the campus continues to grow, the growing consensus is that the medical school that seemed like a dream to administrators in 2005 will be a reality by 2020.

"The commitment to establish an independent UCM medical school is undiminished," the advisory group wrote. "The question is not 'if' a medical school at UCM, but merely 'when.'"